

# ENJOYING GOD

*An Introduction to Christian Theology*



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CAMPUS CRUSADE FOR CHRIST  
*Building Spiritual Movements Everywhere*

## **Enjoying God**

An Introduction to Christian Theology

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*To my mother,*  
**MURENE LUCINA HUBBARD SCHOLES,**  
*who first showed me,  
through her life and words,  
that God could be enjoyed  
with both heart and mind.*



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements • 7

## CHAPTER 1

Our Approach: *Convictions, Persuasions, and Opinions* • 9

## CHAPTER 2

Our God: *The One Who Exists* • 30

## CHAPTER 3

Our God: *Who He Is* • 49

## CHAPTER 4

Revelation: *God's Various Ways of Speaking* • 66

## CHAPTER 5

The Bible: *God's Special Way of Speaking* • 76

## CHAPTER 6

Christ: *The Man Who Is God* • 94

## CHAPTER 7

Humanity: *Good News and Bad News* • 110

## CHAPTER 8

Salvation: *God's Answer to Our Need* • 123

## CHAPTER 9

The Holy Spirit: *Our Indwelling Comforter* • 141

## CHAPTER 10

Christian Growth: *Our Walk of Faith* • 153

## CHAPTER 11

The Invisible War: *Our Supernatural Allies and Enemies* • 167

## CHAPTER 12

The Church: *Our New Family* • 184

## CHAPTER 13

Last Things: *When We See Him Face to Face* • 201



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By the mid-1970s, I had taught very little—and never in theology—so Ted sent me to David Sunde, who had originated the Doctrine Survey course in Campus Crusade. Thanks, Dave, for generously sharing your notes with me that summer, collaborating with me on the course for many years thereafter, and setting an example of how theology can be communicated with both intelligence and passion. No doubt many of your ideas and your overall approach to learning about God are reflected in these pages.

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—ALAN KENT SCHOLES

## CHAPTER 1



# OUR APPROACH

## *Convictions, Persuasions and Opinions*

Sharon peered at me through large oval glasses. “This really isn’t theology you’re teaching us, is it?”

I had to look closely to make sure she wasn’t teasing. Sharon was in her early twenties. She had joined Campus Crusade staff and was taking my basic theology course as part of her ministry preparation.

“Why...do you ask?” I said, groping for words.

“Because every day when I leave class, my heart is so filled with God’s love, I just want to sing. I’m actually enjoying all this doctrine stuff!”

### ENJOYING THROUGH KNOWING

Enjoying “doctrine” and “theology”? Somehow these two words sound stiff and dull. However, *doctrine* is just another word for teaching, and *theology* simply means knowledge of God. I’ve called this book *Enjoying God* because I hope your experience will be a little like Sharon’s. My prayer is that as you explore Christian theology—what Christians believe—you

will increasingly experience the deep joy reserved for those who truly know Him.

How does it work? How does knowing about God help us enjoy an intimate relationship with Him? When Jesus was asked, “Which is the greatest commandment?” he answered, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.”<sup>1</sup> To most Christians, loving God with all your heart and soul makes sense. But how can we love God with our minds? The answer is we need to understand what God has said about who He is, who we are, and how we can have a relationship with Him. Of course, knowing and enjoying God involves more than simply knowing about Him and what He has said. However, I’m convinced we cannot truly know God without first knowing a good deal about Him.

Recently I was listening to a radio psychologist. A young woman called in asking what she should do about her live-in boyfriend who been gone for three days and left no message or note.

“How long have you known him?”

“About four months.”

“And how long has he been living with you?”

“Three months.”

“Have you called the place he lived before?” the psychologist asked.

“I don’t know where he lived; I never called him there.”

“Have you tried calling his work?”

“I don’t know where he works or even the name of the company.”

“How about his friends or his parents, have you tried calling them?”

“He never mentioned any other friends or his parents.”

The psychologist paused, then asked, in obvious consternation,

“Wher’d you meet this guy?”

“In a bar. We always met at the same bar.”

“And what did he say when you asked him about his family or his friends or his work?”

There was moment of silence before the caller quietly said, “I never asked.”

“You never asked? And you say you love this man?”

“Yes, I love him very much, and I’m worried about him.”

“Listen dear; I met my husband 10 years ago at a party. In the first half hour of conversation, I found out who his parents were, what he studied in college, where he worked, and lots more. I knew more about him in 30 minutes than you’ve learned living with this guy for three months! How can you say you ‘love’ him? You know nothing about the man!”

The psychologist was right. How can we genuinely love someone we know little about? The more we know about God—who He is, what He values, what He says about things—the more we can truly begin to love Him with our minds. That’s the purpose of this book: to help you discover what God has said concerning a wide variety of subjects and, as a result, to experience a deeper love relationship with Him.

In each area of theology which follows, you will find a brief sketch of a particular doctrine—an area of teaching God has given to us about Himself, about ourselves, or about the world. In a few pages you can grasp the basic ideas of what the Bible teaches and what Christians believe. We’ll look at what we believe, why we believe it, and how our beliefs can bring us into a more intimate and enjoyable relationship with our God. To begin, let’s explore an idea that may surprise you: not everything we believe as Christians needs to be, or even should be, held as a strong conviction.

## **RECOGNIZING THE LEVELS OF BELIEF**

As a young Christian, I wondered why some believers argued over what seemed like trivial points of belief. I was puzzled

as well by those who called themselves Christians but denied basic doctrines like the deity of Christ or the Trinity. I was like a starving man invited to a feast when I read in C. S. Lewis's introduction to *Mere Christianity* that he was going to present "an agreed, or common, or central, or 'mere' Christianity."<sup>2</sup> But I wondered, wouldn't this be some insipid, worthless, "lowest-common denominator?" As if anticipating my question, Lewis went on to say that the common core of Christian belief "turns out to be something not only positive but pungent; divided from all nonChristian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all."<sup>3</sup> In the remainder of the book, Lewis establishes two categories of views: those that are a part of "mere" Christianity and those that are not.

You might be wondering, isn't this kind of distinction unbiblical? Isn't everything in Scripture essential? Shouldn't believers, once they understand a passage, hold its truth as firmly as they do that of any other passage? In this sense should not every teaching of Scripture be a part of "mere" Christianity?

The answer to each of these questions must be a firm no. The New Testament writers themselves held more than one category of belief. They held some beliefs as nonnegotiable for all Christians, others as matters of individual conscience on which believers could have diversity of understanding, and other beliefs as solely matters of personal preference.

Sadly, the conflict and division that characterized Christianity in Lewis's day is still with us. The need for restoring a unity, based on a distinction between what is central in the Christian faith and what is secondary, is as great as it was when Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* more than a half century ago. In this book I hope to separate those beliefs that are essential to our Christian faith from those that are peripheral or even questionable.

A good way to grasp the kinds of distinctions we need to make is to look at the writing of the apostle Paul. Some people think of Paul as always dogmatic and unyielding. It is true, the

apostle who jumps off the pages of Acts and his many letters was a man of strong convictions and bold action. But that's one reason I find it so intriguing that Paul did not hold all of his beliefs at the same level of importance. We find in Paul's letters three distinct levels of belief: convictions, persuasions, and opinions.

### **Level 1: Convictions**

Even though Paul was a man of peace and tolerance, he considered some issues so crucial and central to the faith he was willing to risk dividing the body of Christ. Paul told us about one such issue in his letter to the Galatians.

The conflict centered on Peter (also called Cephas) who was the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, the center of first-century Christianity. As a good Jew, Peter had grown up eating only the prescribed Jewish foods. After his vision from God,<sup>4</sup> apparently Peter relaxed those rigorous standards and ate Gentile foods, at least when eating with Christians from Gentile backgrounds. When some legalistic Jewish believers arrived from Jerusalem, Peter "began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision."<sup>5</sup> But the problem did not end there. When Peter stopped eating Gentile food, "the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy."<sup>6</sup> Finally Paul could stand it no longer and publicly confronted Peter. "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"<sup>7</sup>

The issue of eating or abstaining from non-kosher food was not, as it might first appear, the real crux of what Paul believed at a conviction level. We know this because he told us in Romans 14, that issues like this are best left to individual persuasion. A far more serious issue was at stake in Antioch.

Peter's behavior, whether intentional or not, was threatening the unity of the body of Christ and confusing the means

of salvation. Peter's withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles challenged the "truth of the gospel" that Paul had been preaching. Specifically, Peter was tacitly denying the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, as the apostle makes clear in Galatians 2:16. Paul was willing to take a strong, public stand because the issue was essential to salvation. The conduct of Peter and the other Jews seemed "calculated to throw obscurity and doubt on the true gospel."<sup>8</sup> In this instance Paul is making a conviction-level stand, not yielding "for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you."<sup>9</sup> In other words, Paul was willing to stand and fight, even risking a public controversy, because the issue of circumcision struck at the heart of the gospel. Any compromise at this point would be tantamount to a loss of the gospel itself!

In Galatians 2, Paul is acting from *convictions* concerning matters crucial to salvation. These are not simply *persuasions* about which the apostle, although certain he is right, can allow other believers to disagree. Rather, in these cases Paul is willing to risk the very unity he spent so much of his life building. The reason he took such a great risk is that it concerned the very heart and truth of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Convictions for Paul are matters of belief where the gospel itself is at stake. In these matters Paul is not "tolerant." Rather he confronts those in error and is ready to break fellowship with them if they do not repent.

Likewise, we believers today should have certain doctrinal truths which we hold at a conviction level. I believe we should have very few convictions, but we should be willing to die, or suffer ridicule, for them. Someone has said, "If you don't have anything you'd be willing to die for, you may not have anything worth living for!" If I'm ever confronted with the choice to either deny Christ or die, I hope and pray I'd have the courage and grace to choose death as many heroic Christians have down through the centuries.

I believe our convictions should be on subjects we have

studied for ourselves. Secondhand convictions are dangerous, although many Christians harbor them. Do you really want to die for something you merely heard a pastor or radio preacher say a decade ago? Furthermore, convictions should be restricted to concepts clearly taught in many passages of Scripture. And we should expect confirmation by Church history with a general, though perhaps not perfect, consensus.

Remember, breaking fellowship with those who significantly disagree at the conviction level is not only legitimate but often essential. By “breaking fellowship” I mean treating a Christian as we would a non-believer. We are polite to non-believers and talk with them, but our main concern is to bring them into a relationship with Christ. In the same way, we can still be cordial and speak with a believer who stubbornly disagrees on a conviction-level issue. However, we are not to treat him or her as a believer in good standing. Rather, our whole effort should be concentrated on trying to bring about a return to an orthodox stand in this crucial area of doctrine. Church leaders should be willing to engage in the appropriate steps of church discipline with mature believers who persist in believing and teaching errors on conviction-level doctrines (Matthew 18:15-17).

Some examples of doctrines I’d classify as convictions are: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith. We will look more closely at each of these convictions in coming chapters.

## **Level 2: Persuasions**

We find a second level of belief in Romans 14. In verse 5 Paul stated, “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Notice, while each person is to be fully persuaded, Paul is not insisting on uniformity of view between “fully persuaded” believers. Each person can have his or her own belief, yet remain in unity with believers who disagree.<sup>11</sup>

“Persuaded” is a strong term meaning “having a filled-in,